

Bombing of Dresden in World War II

The **bombing of Dresden** was a British/American aerial bombing attack on the city of Dresden, the capital of the German state of Saxony, that took place during the Second World War in the European Theatre. In four raids between 13 and 15 February 1945, 722 heavy bombers of the British Royal Air Force (RAF) and 527 of the United States Army Air Forces (USAAF) dropped more than 3,900 tons of high-explosive bombs and incendiary devices on the city.^[1] The bombing and the resulting firestorm destroyed over 1,600 acres (6.5 km²) of the city centre.^[2] An estimated 22,700^[3] to 25,000^[4] people were killed, although larger casualty figures have been claimed over the years. Three more USAAF air raids followed, two occurring on 2 March aimed at the city's railroad marshaling yard and one smaller raid on 17 April aimed at industrial areas.

Immediate German propaganda claims following the attacks and post-war discussions^[5] on whether the attacks were justified has led to the bombing becoming one of the moral *causes célèbres* of the war.^[6] A 1953 United States Air Force report defended the operation as the justified bombing of a strategic target, which they noted was a major rail transport and communication centre, housing 110 factories and 50,000 workers in support of the German war effort.^[7] Several researchers have asserted that not all of the communications infrastructure, such as the bridges, were targeted, nor were the extensive industrial areas outside the city centre.^[8] Critics of the bombing have claimed that Dresden was a cultural landmark of little or no strategic significance, and that the attacks were indiscriminate area bombing and not proportionate to the military gains.^{[9][10][11]} The bombing has been referred to by some in the German far-right as a war crime.^[12]

Large variations in the claimed death toll have fueled the controversy. In March 1945, the German government ordered its press to publish a falsified casualty figure of 200,000 for the Dresden raids, and death toll estimates as high as 500,000 have been given.^{[13][14][15]} The city authorities at the time estimated no more than 25,000 victims, a figure that subsequent investigations supported, including a 2010 study commissioned by the city council.^[16]

Bombing of Dresden	
Part of strategic bombing during World War II	
<div><div><div><div></div></div><div><div></div></div></div><div><div><div></div></div><div><div></div></div></div></div> <div>Dresden after the bombing raid</div>	
Date	13–15 February 1945
Location	Dresden, Nazi Germany
Result	Allied victory <div><div><div>▪ Strategic targets destroyed</div><div>▪ Extensive German casualties</div></div></div>
Belligerents	
<div><div><div><div></div><div>RAF</div></div><div> USAAF</div></div></div> <div><div><div><div></div><div>Luftwaffe</div></div></div></div>	
Strength	
769 heavy bombers (RAF)	28 Messerschmitt Bf 110 night fighters
527 heavy bombers (USAAF)	
784 North American P-51 Mustangs	
Casualties and losses	
8 aircraft shot down	22,700–25,000 deaths

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Dresden, 1945, view from the city hall (Rathaus) over the destroyed city

Background

Early in 1945, the German offensive known as the Battle of the Bulge had been exhausted, as was the disastrous attack by the Luftwaffe on New Year's Day involving elements of eleven combat wings of the Luftwaffe's day fighter force. The Red Army had launched their Silesian Offensives into pre-war German territory. The German army was retreating on all fronts, but still resisting strongly. On 8 February 1945, the Red Army crossed the Oder River, with positions just 70 km from Berlin.^[17] The Eastern and Western Fronts were getting closer, the Western Allies started planning to bomb Berlin and several other eastern cities in conjunction with the Soviet advance in order to cause confusion among German troops and refugees.

A special British Joint Intelligence Subcommittee report titled *German Strategy and Capacity to Resist*, prepared for Winston Churchill's eyes only, predicted that Germany might collapse as early as mid-April if the Soviets overran its eastern defenses. Alternatively, the report warned that the Germans might hold out until November if they could prevent the Soviets from taking Silesia. Hence, any assistance provided to the Soviets on the Eastern Front could shorten the war.^[18] At the time of bombing, the Soviets were conducting their Lower Silesian Offensive.



Image of Dresden during the 1890s. Landmarks include Dresden Frauenkirche, Augustus Bridge, and the Katholische Hofkirche.

Plans for a large and intense aerial bombing of Berlin and the other eastern cities had been discussed under the code name Operation Thunderclap in mid-1944, but had been shelved on 16 August.^[19] These were now re-examined, and the decision was made to draw up a more limited operation.^[20]

On 22 January 1945, the RAF director of bomber operations, Air Commodore Sydney Bufton, sent a memo to the Deputy Chief of the Air Staff, Air Marshal Sir Norman Bottomley, suggesting that what appeared to be a coordinated air attack by the RAF to aid the current Soviet offensive would have a detrimental effect on German morale.^[21] On 25 January, the Joint Intelligence Committee supported the idea, as it tied in with the ULTRA-based intelligence that dozens of German divisions deployed in the west were moving to reinforce the Eastern Front, and that interdiction of these troop movements should be a "high priority."^[22] Arthur Harris, AOC Bomber Command, nicknamed "Bomber" Harris in the British press, and known as an ardent supporter of area bombing,^[23] was asked for his view, and he proposed a simultaneous attack on Chemnitz, Leipzig and Dresden.^[20] That evening Churchill asked the Secretary of State for Air, Sir Archibald Sinclair, what plans had been drawn up to carry out these proposals. He passed on the request to Sir Charles Portal, the Chief of the Air Staff, who answered that "We should use available effort in one big attack on Berlin and attacks on Dresden, Leipzig, and Chemnitz, or any other cities where a severe blitz will not only cause confusion in the evacuation from the East, but will also hamper the movement of troops from the West."^[20] He mentioned that aircraft diverted to such raids should not be taken away from the current primary tasks of destroying oil production facilities, jet aircraft factories, and submarine yards.^{[20][24]}



A view from the town hall over the Altstadt (old town), 1910

Churchill was not satisfied with this answer and on 26 January pressed Sinclair for a plan of operations: "I asked [last night] whether Berlin, and no doubt other large cities in east Germany, should not now be considered especially attractive targets.... Pray report to me tomorrow what is going to be done".^[25]

In response to Churchill's inquiry, Sinclair approached Bottomley who asked Harris to undertake attacks on Berlin, Dresden, Leipzig, and Chemnitz, as soon as moonlight and weather allowed, "...with the particular object of exploiting the confused conditions which are likely to exist in the above mentioned cities during the successful Russian advance."^[25] This activity allowed Sinclair to inform Churchill on 27 January of the Air Staff's agreement that, "subject to the overriding claims" on other targets under the Pointblank Directive, strikes against communications in these cities to disrupt civilian evacuation from the east and troop movement from the west would be made.^{[26][27]}

On 31 January, Bottomley sent a message to Portal saying a heavy attack on Dresden and other cities "will cause great confusion in civilian evacuation from the east and hamper movement of reinforcements from other fronts".^[28] British historian Frederick Taylor mentions a further memo sent to the Chiefs of Staff Committee by Sir Douglas Evill on 1 February, in which Evill states interfering with mass civilian movements was a major, even key, factor in the decision to bomb the city centre. Attacks there, where main railway junctions, telephone systems, city administration and utilities were located, would result in "chaos." Ostensibly, Britain had learned this after the Coventry Blitz, when loss of this crucial infrastructure had supposedly longer-lasting effects than attacks on war plants.^[29]

During the Yalta Conference on 4 February, the Deputy Chief of the Soviet General Staff, General Aleksei Antonov, raised the issue of hampering the reinforcement of German troops from the western front by paralysing the junctions of Berlin and Leipzig with aerial bombardment. In response, Chief of the British Air Staff Portal, who was in Yalta, asked Bottomley to send him a list of objectives to discuss with the Soviets. Bottomley's list included oil plants, tank and aircraft factories and the cities of Berlin and Dresden.^{[30][31]} A British interpreter later claimed that Antonov and Joseph Stalin asked for the bombing of Dresden, but there is no mention of these requests in the official record of the conference and the claim was assessed as possible Cold War propaganda.^[32]

Military and industrial profile

Dresden was Germany's seventh-largest city and, according to the RAF at the time, the largest remaining unbombed built-up area.^[33] Taylor writes that an official 1942 guide to the city described it as "one of the foremost industrial locations of the Reich" and in 1944 the German Army High Command's Weapons Office listed 127 medium-to-large factories and workshops that were supplying the army with materiel.^[34] Nonetheless, according to some historians, the contribution of Dresden to the German war effort may not have been as significant as the planners thought.^[35]

The US Air Force Historical Division wrote a report in response to the international concern about the bombing - the report remained classified until December 1978.^[36] This said that there were 110 factories and 50,000 workers in the city supporting the German war effort at the time of the raid.^[37] According to the report, there were aircraft components factories; a poison gas factory (Chemische Fabrik Goye and Company); an anti-aircraft and field gun factory (Lehman); an optical goods factory (Zeiss Ikon AG); as well as factories producing electrical and X-ray apparatus (Koch & Sterzel AG); gears and differentials (Saxoniswerke); and electric gauges (Gebrüder Bassler). It also said there were barracks, hutted camps, and a munitions storage depot.^[38]

The USAF report also states that two of Dresden's traffic routes were of military importance: north-south from Germany to Czechoslovakia, and east-west along the central European uplands.^[39] The city was at the junction of the Berlin-Prague-Vienna railway line, as well as the Munich-Breslau, and Hamburg-Leipzig lines.^[39] Colonel Harold E. Cook, a US POW held in the Friedrichstadt marshaling yard the night before the attacks, later said that "I saw with my own eyes that Dresden was an armed camp: thousands of German troops, tanks and artillery and miles of freight cars loaded with supplies supporting and transporting German logistics towards the east to meet the Russians".^[40]

An RAF memo issued to airmen on the night of the attack indicated that a secondary purpose of the raid was to "show the Russians when they arrive [at Dresden] what [the British] Bomber Command can do." The memo stated:

Dresden, the seventh largest city in Germany and not much smaller than Manchester is also the largest unbombed builtup area the enemy has got. In the midst of winter with refugees pouring westward and troops to be rested, roofs are at a premium, not only to give shelter to workers, refugees, and troops alike, but to house the administrative services displaced from other areas. At one time well known for its china, Dresden has developed into an industrial city of first-class importance.... The intentions of the attack are to hit the enemy where he will feel it most, behind an already partially collapsed front... and incidentally to show the Russians when they arrive what Bomber Command can do.^{[33][41]}

In the raid, major industrial areas in the suburbs, which stretched for miles, were not targeted.^[8] According to historian Donald Miller, "the economic disruption would have been far greater had Bomber Command targeted the suburban areas where most of Dresden's manufacturing might was concentrated".^[42]

The attacks



Situation of battlefronts in Europe by the time of Dresden bombings. The white-colored areas were held by Germany, the rose ones by the Allies, and the bright-red color denotes the Allied advances in the fronts

Night of 13/14 February

The Dresden attack was to have begun with a USAAF Eighth Air Force bombing raid on 13 February 1945. The Eighth Air Force had already bombed the railway yards near the centre of the city twice in daytime raids: once on 7 October 1944 with 70 tons of high-explosive bombs killing more than 400,^[43] then again with 133 bombers on 16 January 1945, dropping 279 tons of high-explosives and 41 tons of incendiaries.^[7]

On 13 February 1945, bad weather over Europe prevented any USAAF operations, and it was left to RAF Bomber Command to carry out the first raid. It had been decided that the raid would be a double strike, in which a second wave of bombers would attack three hours after the first, just as the rescue teams were trying to put out the fires.^[44] Other raids were carried out that night to confuse German air defences. Three hundred and sixty heavy bombers (Lancasters and Halifaxes) bombed a synthetic oil plant in Böhlen, 60 miles (97 km) from Dresden, while de Havilland Mosquito medium bombers attacked Magdeburg, Bonn, Misburg near Hanover and Nuremberg.^[45]

When Polish crews of the designated squadrons were preparing for the mission, the terms of the Yalta agreement were made known to them. There was a huge uproar, since the Yalta agreement handed parts of Poland over to the Soviet Union. There was talk of mutiny among the Polish pilots, and their British officers removed their side arms. The Polish Government ordered the pilots to follow their orders and fly their missions over Dresden, which they did.^[46]



Mosquito marker planes dropped the target indicators, which glowed red and green to guide the bombers.



A Lancaster releases the main part of its load, a 4,000 lb (1,800 kg) HC "cookie" and 108 30 lb (14 kg) "J" incendiaries. (over Duisburg 1944)

The first of the British aircraft took off at around 17:20 hours CET for the 700-mile (1,100 km) journey.^[a] This was a group of Lancasters from Bomber Command's 83 Squadron, No. 5 Group, acting as the Pathfinders, or flare force, whose job it was to find Dresden and drop magnesium parachute flares, known to the Germans as "Christmas trees", to light up the area for the bombers. The next set of aircraft to leave England were twin-engined Mosquito marker planes, which would identify target areas and drop 1,000-pound target indicators (TIs)^[47] that created a red glow for the bombers to aim at.^[48] The attack was to centre on the Ostragehege sports stadium, next to the city's medieval *Altstadt* (old town), with its congested and highly combustible timbered buildings.^[49]

The main bomber force, called *Plate Rack*, took off shortly after the Pathfinders. This group of 254 Lancasters carried 500 tons of high explosives and 375 tons of incendiaries ("fire bombs"). There were 200,000 incendiaries in all, with the high-explosive bombs ranging in weight from 500 pounds to 4,000 pounds—the so-called two-ton cookies,^[49] also known as "blockbusters," because they could destroy an entire large building or street. The high explosives were intended to rupture water mains and blow off roofs, doors, and windows to create an air flow to feed the fires caused by the incendiaries that followed.^{[50][51]}

The Lancasters crossed into French airspace near the Somme, then into Germany just north of Cologne. At 22:00 hours, the force heading for Böhlen split away from Plate Rack, which turned south east toward the Elbe. By this time, ten of the Lancasters were out of service, leaving 244 to continue to Dresden.^[52]

The sirens started sounding in Dresden at 21:51 (CET).^{[b][53]} Wing Commander Maurice Smith, flying in a Mosquito, gave the order to the Lancasters: "Controller to Plate Rack Force: Come in and bomb glow of red target indicators as planned. Bomb the glow of red TIs as planned."^[54] The first bombs were released at 22:14, the Lancasters flying in at 8,000 feet (2,400 m),^[55] with all but one Lancaster's bombs released within two minutes, and the last one releasing at 22:22. The fan-shaped area that was bombed was 1.25 miles (2.01 km) long, and at its extreme about 1.75 miles (2.82 km) wide. The shape and total devastation of the area was created by the bombers of No. 5 Group flying over the head of the fan (Ostragehege stadium) on prearranged compass bearings and releasing their bombs at different prearranged times.^{[56][57]}

The second attack, three hours later, was by Lancaster aircraft of 1, 3, 6 and 8 Groups, 8 Group being the Pathfinders. By now, the thousands of fires from the burning city could be seen more than 60 miles (97 km) away on the ground, and 500 miles (800 km) away in the air, with smoke rising to 15,000 feet (4,600 m).^[58] The Pathfinders therefore decided to expand the target, dropping flares on either side of the firestorm, including the *Hauptbahnhof*, the main train station, and the *Großer Garten*, a large park, both of which had escaped damage during the first raid. The German sirens sounded again at 01:05, but as there was practically no electricity, these were small hand-held sirens that were heard within only a block.^[52] Between 01:21 and 01:45, 529 Lancasters dropped more than 1,800 tons of bombs.

14–15 February

On the morning of 14 February 431 bombers of the 1st Bombardment Division of the United States VIII Bomber Command were scheduled to bomb Dresden at around midday, and the 3rd Bombardment Division were to follow the 1st and bomb Chemnitz, while the 2nd Bombardment Division would bomb a synthetic oil plant in Magdeburg. The bomber groups would be protected by the 784 North American P-51 Mustangs of VIII Fighter Command, which meant that there would be almost 2,100 aircraft of the United States Eighth Air Force over Saxony during 14 February.^[59]

There is some confusion in the primary sources over what was the target in Dresden, whether it was the marshalling yards near the centre or centre of the built up area. The report by the 1st Bombardment Division's commander to his commander states that the targeting sequence was the centre of the built up area in Dresden if the weather was clear. If clouds obscured Dresden but Chemnitz was clear, Chemnitz was the target. If both were obscured, they would bomb the centre of Dresden using H2X radar.^[60] The mix of bombs for the Dresden raid was about 40% incendiaries—much closer to the RAF city busting mix than that the USAAF usually used in precision bombardment.^[61] Taylor compares this 40% mix with the raid on Berlin on 3 February, where the ratio was 10% incendiaries. This was a common mix when the USAAF anticipated cloudy conditions over the target.^[62]

316 B-17 Flying Fortresses bombed Dresden, dropping 771 tons of bombs.^{[63][64]} The rest misidentified their targets. Sixty bombed Prague, dropping 153 tons of bombs on the Czech city while others bombed Bruix and Pilsen.^[64] The 379th bombardment group started to bomb Dresden at 12:17, aiming at marshalling yards in the Friedrichstadt district west of the city centre, as the area was not obscured by smoke and cloud. The 303rd group arrived over Dresden 2 minutes after the 379th found that their view was obscured by clouds so they bombed Dresden using H2X radar to target this location. The groups that followed the 303rd, (92nd, 306th, 379th, 384th and 457th) also found Dresden obscured by clouds and they too used H2X to locate the target. H2X aiming caused the groups to bomb inaccurately with a wide dispersal over the Dresden area. The last group to bomb Dresden was the 306th and they had finished by 12:30.^[65]

Strafing of civilians has become a traditional part of the oral history of the raids since a March 1945 article in the Nazi-run weekly newspaper *Das Reich* claimed that this had occurred.^[c] Historian Götz Bergander, who was himself an eyewitness of the raids, found no reports on strafing for 13–15 February, neither by any of the pilots nor by the German military and police. He asserted in *Dresden im Luftkrieg* (1977) that only a few tales of civilians being strafed were reliable in details, and all were related to the daylight attack on 14 February. He concluded that some memory of eyewitnesses was real, but that it had misinterpreted the firing in an airfight as being deliberately aimed at people on the ground.^[67] In 2000,

historian Helmut Schnatz found that there was an explicit order to RAF pilots not to strafe civilians on the way back home from Dresden. He also reconstructed timelines with the result that strafing would have been almost impossible due to lack of time and fuel.^[68] Frederick Taylor in *Dresden* (2004), basing most of his analysis on the work of Bergander and Schnatz, concludes that no strafing took place, although some stray bullets from an aerial dog fight may have hit the ground and been mistaken for strafing by those in the vicinity.^[69] The official historical commission collected 103 detailed eyewitness accounts and let the local bomb disposal services search according to their assertions: They found no bullets or fragments that would have been used by planes of the Dresden raids.^[70]

On 15 February, the 1st Bombardment Division's primary target—the Böhlen synthetic oil plant near Leipzig—was obscured by cloud, so the Division's groups diverted to their secondary target, Dresden. Dresden was also obscured by clouds, so the groups targeted the city using H2X. The first group to arrive over the target was the 401st, but it missed the city centre and bombed Dresden's southeastern suburbs, with bombs also landing on the nearby towns of Meissen and Pirna. The other groups all bombed Dresden between 12:00 and 12:10. They failed to hit the marshalling yards in the Friedrichstadt district and, as on the previous raid, their ordnance scattered over a wide area.^[71]

German defensive action

Dresden's air defenses had been depleted by the need for more weaponry to fight the Red Army, and the city lost its last heavy flak battery in January 1945. By this point in the war, the Luftwaffe was seriously hampered by a shortage of both pilots and aircraft fuel; the German radar system had also been degraded, lowering the warning time to prepare for air attacks. The RAF also had an advantage over the Germans in the field of electronic radar countermeasures.^[72]

Of a total of 796 British bombers that participated in the raid, six bombers were lost, three of those hit by bombs dropped by aircraft flying over them. On the following day, a single US bomber was shot down, as the large escort force was able to prevent Luftwaffe day fighters from disrupting the attack.^[73]

On the ground

It is not possible to describe! Explosion after explosion. It was beyond belief, worse than the blackest nightmare. So many people were horribly burnt and injured. It became more and more difficult to breathe. It was dark and all of us tried to leave this cellar with inconceivable panic. Dead and dying people were trampled upon, luggage was left or snatched up out of our hands by rescuers. The basket with our twins covered with wet cloths was snatched up out of my mother's hands and we were pushed upstairs by the people behind us. We saw the burning street, the falling ruins and the terrible firestorm. My mother covered us with wet blankets and coats she found in a water tub.

We saw terrible things: cremated adults shrunk to the size of small children, pieces of arms and legs, dead people, whole families burnt to death, burning people ran to and fro, burnt coaches filled with civilian refugees, dead rescuers and soldiers, many were calling and looking for their children and families,



Bodies of civilian casualties

and fire everywhere, everywhere fire, and all the time the hot wind of the firestorm threw people back into the burning houses they were trying to escape from.

I cannot forget these terrible details. I can never forget them.

— Lothar Metzger, survivor.^[74]

The sirens had started sounding in Dresden at 21:51 (CET).^[53] Frederick Taylor writes that the Germans could see that a large enemy bomber formation—or what they called "*ein dicker Hund*" (lit: a fat dog, a "major thing")—was approaching somewhere in the east. At 21:39, the Reich Air Defence Leadership issued an enemy aircraft warning for Dresden, although, at that point, it was thought Leipzig might be the target. At 21:59, the Local Air Raid Leadership confirmed that the bombers were in the area of Dresden-Pirna.^[75] Taylor writes the city was largely undefended; a night fighter force of ten Messerschmitt 110s at Klotzsche airfield was scrambled, but it took them half an hour to get into an attack position. At 22:03, the Local Air Raid Leadership issued the first definitive warning: "Warning! Warning! Warning! The lead aircraft of the major enemy bomber forces have changed course and are now approaching the city area".^[76]

To my left I suddenly see a woman. I can see her to this day and shall never forget it. She carries a bundle in her arms. It is a baby. She runs, she falls, and the child flies in an arc into the fire.

Suddenly, I saw people again, right in front of me. They scream and gesticulate with their hands, and then—to my utter horror and amazement—I see how one after the other they simply seem to let themselves drop to the ground. (Today I know that these unfortunate people were the victims of lack of oxygen). They fainted and then burnt to cinders.

Insane fear grips me and from then on I repeat one simple sentence to myself continuously: "I don't want to burn to death". I do not know how many people I fell over. I know only one thing: that I must not burn.

— Margaret Freyer, survivor.^[77]



Over ninety percent of the city centre was destroyed.



Frauenkirche ruins with a figure of Martin Luther that survived the bombings

There were very few public air raid shelters—the largest, underneath the main railway station, was housing 6,000 refugees.^[78] As a result, most people took shelter in their cellars, but one of the air raid precautions the city had taken was to remove the thick cellar walls between rows of buildings, and replace them with thin partitions that could be knocked through in an emergency. The idea was that, as one building collapsed or filled with smoke, those using the basement as a shelter could knock the walls down and run into adjoining buildings. With the city on fire everywhere, those fleeing from one burning cellar simply ran into another, with the result that thousands of bodies were found piled up in houses at the end of city blocks.^[79]

A Dresden police report written shortly after the attacks reported that the old town and the inner eastern suburbs had been engulfed in a single fire that had destroyed almost 12,000 dwellings.^[80] The same report said that the raids had destroyed 24 banks, 26 insurance buildings,

31 stores and retail houses, 640 shops, 64 warehouses, 2 market halls, 31 large hotels, 26 public houses, 63 administrative buildings, 3 theatres, 18 cinemas, 11 churches, 6 chapels; 5 other cultural buildings, 19 hospitals including auxiliary, overflow hospitals, and private clinics, 39 schools, 5 consulates, the zoo, the waterworks, the railways, 19 postal facilities, 4 tram facilities, and 19 ships and barges. The Wehrmacht's main command post in the Taschenbergpalais, 19 military hospitals and a number of less significant military facilities were also destroyed.^[80] Almost 200 factories were damaged, 136 seriously damaged (including several of the Zeiss Ikon precision optical engineering works), 28 with medium to serious damage, and 35 with light damage.^[81]

An RAF assessment showed that 23 percent of the industrial buildings, and 56 percent of the non-industrial buildings, not counting residential buildings, had been seriously damaged. Around 78,000 dwellings had been completely destroyed; 27,700 were uninhabitable, and 64,500 damaged, but readily repairable.^[7]

During his post-war interrogation, Albert Speer, Minister of Armaments and War Production for the Third Reich, indicated that Dresden's industrial recovery from the bombings was rapid.^[82]



Body of a woman who died in an air-raid shelter

Fatalities



A pile of bodies before cremation

According to official German report *Tagesbefehl* (Order of the Day) no. 47 ("TB47") issued on 22 March the number of dead recovered by that date was 20,204, including 6,865 who were cremated on the *Altmarkt* square, and they expected that the total number of deaths would be about 25,000.^{[83][84]} Another report on 3 April put the number of corpses recovered at 22,096.^[85] Three municipal and 17 rural cemeteries outside Dresden recorded up to 30 April 1945 a total of at least 21,895 bodies of the Dresden raids, including those cremated on the *Altmarkt*.^[86]

Between 100,000 and 200,000 refugees^[87] fleeing westwards from advancing Soviet forces were in the city at the time of the bombing. Exact figures are unknown, but reliable estimates were calculated based on train arrivals, foot traffic, and the extent to which emergency accommodation had to be organised.^[88] The city authorities did not distinguish between residents and refugees when establishing casualty numbers and "took great pains to count all the dead, identified and unidentified".^[88] This was largely achievable because most of the dead succumbed to suffocation; in only four places were recovered remains so badly burned that it proved impossible to ascertain the number of victims. The uncertainty introduced by this is thought to amount to a total of no more than 100.^[88] 35,000 people were registered with the authorities as missing after the raids, around 10,000 of whom were later found alive.^[88]

A further 1,858 bodies were discovered during the reconstruction of Dresden between the end of the war and 1966.^[89] Since 1989, despite extensive excavation for new buildings, no war-related bodies have been found.^[90] Seeking to establish a definitive casualty figure, in part to address propagandisation of the bombing by far-right groups, the Dresden city council in 2005 authorized an independent Historian's Commission (Historikerkommission) to conduct a new, thorough investigation, collecting and evaluating available sources. The results were published in 2010 and stated that a minimum of 22,700^[3] and a maximum of 25,000 people^[4] were killed.

Wartime political responses

German

Development of a German political response to the raid took several turns. Initially, some of the leadership, especially Robert Ley and Joseph Goebbels, wanted to use it as a pretext for abandonment of the Geneva Conventions on the Western Front. In the end, the only political action the German government took was to exploit it for propaganda purposes.^[91] Goebbels is reported to have wept with rage for twenty minutes after he heard the news of the catastrophe, before launching into a bitter attack on Hermann Göring, the commander of the Luftwaffe: "If I had the power I would drag this cowardly good-for-nothing, this Reich marshal, before a court. ... How much guilt does this parasite not bear for all this, which we owe to his indolence and love of his own comforts. ...".^[92]

On 16 February, the Propaganda Ministry issued a press release that stated that Dresden had no war industries; it was a city of culture.^[93]

On 25 February, a new leaflet with photographs of two burned children was released under the title "Dresden—Massacre of Refugees," stating that 200,000 had died. Since no official estimate had been developed, the numbers were speculative, but newspapers such as the Stockholm Svenska Morgonbladet used phrases such as "privately from Berlin," to explain where they had obtained the figures.^[94] Frederick Taylor states that "there is good reason to believe that later in March copies of—or extracts from—[an official police report] were leaked to the neutral press by Goebbels's Propaganda Ministry ... doctored with an extra zero to make [the total dead from the raid] 202,040".^[14] On 4 March, *Das Reich*, a weekly newspaper founded by Goebbels, published a lengthy article emphasizing the suffering and destruction of a cultural icon, without mentioning any damage the attacks had caused to the German war effort.^{[95][96]}

Taylor writes that this propaganda was effective, as it not only influenced attitudes in neutral countries at the time, but also reached the British House of Commons when Richard Stokes, a Labour Party Member of Parliament (MP), a long term opponent of area-bombing,^[97] quoted information from the German Press Agency (controlled by the Propaganda Ministry). It was Stokes' questions in the House of Commons that were in large part responsible for the shift in the UK against this type of raid. Taylor suggests that, although the destruction of Dresden would have affected people's support for the Allies regardless of German propaganda, at least some of the outrage did depend on Goebbels' massaging of the casualty figures.^[98]

British

The destruction of the city provoked unease in intellectual circles in Britain. According to Max Hastings, by February 1945, attacks upon German cities had become largely irrelevant to the outcome of the war and the name of Dresden resonated with cultured people all over Europe—"the home of so much charm and beauty, a refuge for Trollope's heroines, a landmark of the Grand Tour." He writes that the bombing was the first time the public in Allied countries seriously questioned the military actions used to defeat the Germans.^[101]

The unease was made worse by an Associated Press story that the Allies had resorted to terror bombing. At a press briefing held by the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force two days after the raids, British Air Commodore Colin McKay Grierson told journalists:

First of all they (Dresden and similar towns) are the centres to which evacuees are being moved. They are centres of communications through which traffic is moving across to the Russian Front, and from the Western Front to the East, and they are sufficiently close to the Russian Front for the Russians to continue the successful prosecution of their battle. I think these three reasons probably cover the bombing.^[102]

One of the journalists asked whether the principal aim of bombing Dresden would be to cause confusion among the refugees or to blast communications carrying military supplies. Grierson answered that the primary aim was to attack communications to prevent the Germans from moving military supplies, and to stop movement in all directions if possible. He then added in an offhand remark that the raid also helped destroy "what is left of German morale." Howard Cowan, an Associated Press war correspondent, subsequently filed a story saying that the Allies had resorted to terror bombing. There were follow-up newspaper editorials on the issue and a longtime opponent of strategic bombing, Richard Stokes MP, asked questions in the House of Commons on 6 March.^{[103][104]}



British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was ultimately responsible for the bombing even though he later tried to distance himself from it.^{[99][100]}

Churchill subsequently distanced himself from the bombing.^{[99][105][106]} On 28 March, in a memo sent by telegram to General Ismay for the British Chiefs of Staff and the Chief of the Air Staff, he wrote:

It seems to me that the moment has come when the question of bombing of German cities simply for the sake of increasing the terror, though under other pretexts, should be reviewed. Otherwise we shall come into control of an utterly ruined land... The destruction of Dresden remains a serious query against the conduct of Allied bombing. I am of the opinion that military objectives must henceforward be more strictly studied in our own interests than that of the enemy.

The Foreign Secretary has spoken to me on this subject, and I feel the need for more precise concentration upon military objectives such as oil and communications behind the immediate battle-zone, rather than on mere acts of terror and wanton destruction, however impressive.^{[107][108]}

Having been given a paraphrased version of Churchill's memo by Bottomley, on 29 March, Air Chief Marshal Arthur Harris wrote to the Air Ministry:^[109]

I ... assume that the view under consideration is something like this: no doubt in the past we were justified in attacking German cities. But to do so was always repugnant and now that the Germans are beaten anyway we can properly abstain from proceeding with these attacks. This is a doctrine to which I could never subscribe. Attacks on cities like any other act of war are intolerable unless they are strategically justified. But they are strategically justified in so far as they tend to shorten the war and preserve the lives of Allied soldiers. To my mind we have absolutely no right to give them up unless it is certain that they will not have this effect. I do not personally regard the whole of the remaining cities of Germany as worth the bones of one British Grenadier.

The feeling, such as there is, over Dresden, could be easily explained by any psychiatrist. It is connected with German bands and Dresden shepherdesses. Actually Dresden was a mass of munitions works, an intact government centre, and a key transportation point to the East. It is now none of these things.^[110]

The phrase "worth the bones of one British grenadier" echoed a famous sentence used by Otto von Bismarck: "The whole of the Balkans is not worth the bones of a single Pomeranian grenadier".^[109] Under pressure from the Chiefs of Staff and in response to the views expressed by Portal and Harris among others, Churchill withdrew his memo and issued a new



Air Chief Marshal Arthur Harris, head of RAF Bomber Command, strongly objected to Churchill's comparison of the raid to an "act of terror," a comment Churchill withdrew in the face of Harris's protest.

one.^{[110][111][112]} This was completed on 1 April 1945:

It seems to me that the moment has come when the question of the so called 'area-bombing' of German cities should be reviewed from the point of view of our own interests. If we come into control of an entirely ruined land, there will be a great shortage of accommodation for ourselves and our allies. ... We must see to it that our attacks do no more harm to ourselves in the long run than they do to the enemy's war effort.^{[113][114]}

Timeline

Table of the air raids on Dresden by the Allies during World War II.^[7]

Date	Target area	Force	Aircraft	High explosive bombs on target (tons)	Incendiary bombs on target (tons)	Total tonnage
7 October 1944	Marshalling yards	US 8th AF	30	72.5	—	72.5
16 January 1945	Marshalling yards	US 8th AF	133	279.8	41.6	321.4
14 February 1945	City area	RAF BC	772	1477.7	1181.6	2659.3
14 February 1945	Marshalling yards	US 8th AF	316	487.7	294.3	782.0
15 February 1945	Marshalling yards	US 8th AF	211	465.6	—	465.6
2 March 1945	Marshalling yards	US 8th AF	406	940.3	140.5	1080.8
17 April 1945	Marshalling yards	US 8th AF	572	1526.4	164.5	1690.9
17 April 1945	Industrial area	US 8th AF	8	28.0	—	28.0

Reconstruction and reconciliation

After the war, and again after [German reunification](#), great efforts were made to rebuild some of Dresden's former landmarks, such as the [Frauenkirche](#), the [Semperoper](#) (the Saxony state opera house) and the [Zwinger Palace](#) (the latter two were rebuilt before reunification).



The Semperoper, the Dresden state opera house, in 2007. It was destroyed during the bombing, and was rebuilt in 1985. It opened exactly 40 years after the bombing on 13 February with the same opera that was last performed before its destruction, *Der Freischütz* by Carl Maria von Weber.

In 1956, Dresden entered a twin-town relationship with Coventry. As a centre of military and munitions production, Coventry suffered some of the worst attacks on any British city at the hands of the Luftwaffe during the Coventry Blitzes of 1940 and 1941, which killed over 1,200 civilians and destroyed its cathedral.^[115]

The Dresden synagogue, which was burned during *Kristallnacht* on 9 November 1938, was rebuilt in 2001 and opened for worship on 9 November and is called the New Synagogue. The original synagogue's Star of David was installed above the entrance of the new building—Alfred Neugebauer, a local firefighter, saved it from the fire and hid it in his home until the end of the war. Dresden's Jewish population declined from 4675 in 1933, to 1265 in 1941 (the eve of the implementation of the Nazis' extermination programme), to just a handful after almost all of those who had remained were forcibly sent to Riga Ghetto and Auschwitz and Theresienstadt concentration camps between 1941 and 1945.^[116] On the morning of 13 February 1945, the Jews remaining in Dresden were ordered to report for deportation on 16 February. But as one of them, Victor Klemperer, recorded in his diaries: "... on the evening of this 13 February the catastrophe overtook Dresden: the bombs fell, the houses

collapsed, the phosphorus flowed, the burning beams crashed on to the heads of Aryans and non-Aryans alike and Jew and Christian met death in the same firestorm; whoever of the [Jews] was spared by this night was delivered, for in the general chaos he could escape the Gestapo".^[117] But in recent years the Jewish population has increased in Dresden, as it has elsewhere in Germany.^[118] Paul Spiegel, the then head of Central Council of Jews in Germany, called the new synagogue a concrete expression of the Jewish community's desire to stay.^[118]

In 1990, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a group of prominent Dresdeners formed an international appeal known as the "Call from Dresden" to request help in rebuilding the Lutheran Frauenkirche, the destruction of which had over the years become a symbol of the bombing.^[119] The baroque Church of Our Lady (completed in 1743) had initially appeared to survive the raids, but collapsed a few days later, and the ruins were left in place by later Communist governments as an anti-war memorial.



The ruins of the Frauenkirche in 1991



The reconstructed Frauenkirche is again a part of the baroque skyline of Dresden

A British charity, the Dresden Trust, was formed in 1993 to raise funds in response to the call for help, raising £600,000 from 2,000 people and 100 companies and trusts in Britain. One of the gifts they made to the project was an eight-metre high orb and cross made in London by goldsmiths Gant MacDonald, using medieval nails recovered from the ruins of the roof of Coventry Cathedral, and crafted in part by Alan Smith, the son of a pilot who took part in the raid.^[120]

The new Frauenkirche was reconstructed over seven years by architects using 3D computer technology to analyse old photographs and every piece of rubble that had been kept and was formally consecrated on 30 October 2005, in a

service attended by some 1,800 guests, including Germany's president, Horst Köhler; previous and current chancellors, Gerhard Schröder and Angela Merkel; and the Duke of Kent.^{[121][122]}

Post-war debate

British historian Frederick Taylor wrote of the attacks: "The destruction of Dresden has an epically tragic quality to it. It was a wonderfully beautiful city and a symbol of baroque humanism and all that was best in Germany. It also contained all of the worst from Germany during the Nazi period. In that sense it is an absolutely exemplary tragedy for the horrors of 20th century warfare and a symbol of destruction".^[123]

Several factors have made the bombing a unique point of contention and debate. First among these are the Nazi government's exaggerated claims immediately afterwards,^{[13][14][15]} which drew upon the beauty of the city, its importance as a cultural icon; the deliberate creation of a firestorm; the number of victims; the extent to which it was a necessary military target; and the fact that it was attacked toward the end of the war, raising the question of whether the bombing was needed to hasten the end.

Legal considerations

The Hague Conventions, addressing the codes of wartime conduct on land and at sea, were adopted before the rise of air power. Despite repeated diplomatic attempts to update international humanitarian law to include aerial warfare, it was not updated before the outbreak of World War II. The absence of positive international humanitarian law does not mean that the laws of war did not cover aerial warfare, but there was no general agreement of how to interpret those laws.^[124]

Falsification of evidence

The bombing of Dresden has been used by Holocaust deniers and pro-Nazi polemicists—most notably by the British writer David Irving in his book *The Destruction of Dresden*—in an attempt to establish a moral equivalence between the war crimes committed by the Nazi government and the killing of German civilians by Allied bombing raids.^[125] As such, "grossly inflated"^[5] casualty figures have been promulgated over the years, many based on a figure of over 200,000 deaths quoted in a forged version of the casualty report, *Tagesbefehl* No. 47, that originated with Hitler's Reich Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels.^{[126][127][128]}

Marshall inquiry

An inquiry conducted at the behest of U.S. Army Chief of Staff, General George C. Marshall, stated the raid was justified by the available intelligence. The inquiry declared the elimination of the German ability to reinforce a counter-attack against Marshal Konev's extended line or, alternatively, to retreat and regroup using Dresden as a base of operations, were important military objectives. As Dresden had been largely untouched during the war due to its location, it was one of the few remaining functional rail and communications centres. A secondary objective was to disrupt the industrial use of Dresden for munitions manufacture, which American intelligence believed was the case. The shock to military planners and to the Allied civilian populations of the German counterattack known as the Battle of the Bulge had ended speculation that the war was almost over, and may have contributed to the decision to continue with the aerial bombardment of German cities.^[129]

The inquiry concluded that by the presence of active German military units nearby, and the presence of fighters and anti-aircraft within an effective range, Dresden qualified as "defended".^[7] By this stage in the war both the British and the Germans had integrated air defences at the national level. The German national air-defence system could be used to argue—as the tribunal did—that no German city was "undefended".

Marshall's tribunal declared that no extraordinary decision was made to single out Dresden (e.g. to take advantage of the large number of refugees, or purposely terrorize the German populace). It was argued that the intent of area bombing was to disrupt communications and destroy industrial production. The American inquiry established that the Soviets, pursuant to allied agreements for the United States and the United Kingdom to provide air support for the Soviet offensive toward Berlin, had requested area bombing of Dresden to prevent a counterattack through Dresden, or the use of Dresden as a regrouping point after a strategic retreat.^[130]

U.S. Air Force Historical Division report

A report by the U.S. Air Force Historical Division (USAFHD) analyzed the circumstances of the raid and concluded that it was militarily necessary and justified, based on the following points:^[7]

1. The raid had legitimate military ends, brought about by exigent military circumstances.
2. Military units and anti-aircraft defences were sufficiently close that it was not valid to consider the city "undefended."
3. The raid did not use extraordinary means but was comparable to other raids used against comparable targets.
4. The raid was carried out through the normal chain of command, pursuant to directives and agreements then in force.
5. The raid achieved the military objective, without excessive loss of civilian life.

City	Population (1939)	Tonnage		
		American	British	Total
<u>Berlin</u>	4,339,000	22,090	45,517	67,607
<u>Hamburg</u>	1,129,000	17,104	22,583	39,687
<u>Munich</u>	841,000	11,471	7,858	19,329
<u>Cologne</u>	772,000	10,211	34,712	44,923
<u>Leipzig</u>	707,000	5,410	6,206	11,616
<u>Essen</u>	667,000	1,518	36,420	37,938
<u>Dresden</u>	642,000	4,441	2,659	7,100

A U.S. Air Force table showing the tonnage of bombs dropped by the Allies on Germany's seven largest cities during the war.^[7]

The first point regarding the legitimacy of the raid depends on two claims: first, that the railyards subjected to American precision bombing were an important logistical target, and that the city was also an important industrial centre.^[7] Even after the main firebombing, there were two further raids on the Dresden railway yards by the USAAF. The first was on 2 March 1945, by 406 B-17s, which dropped 940 tons of high-explosive bombs and 141 tons of incendiaries. The second was on 17 April, when 580 B-17s dropped 1,554 tons of high-explosive bombs and 165 tons of incendiaries.^[7]

As far as Dresden being a militarily significant industrial centre, an official 1942 guide described the German city as "...one of the foremost industrial locations of the Reich," and in 1944, the German Army High Command's Weapons Office listed 127 medium-to-large factories and workshops that supplied materiel to the military.^[34] Dresden was the seventh largest German city, and by far the largest un-bombed built-up area left, and thus was contributing to the defence of Germany itself.^[131]

According to the USAFHD, there were 110 factories and 50,000 workers supporting the German war effort in Dresden at the time of the raid.^[7] These factories manufactured fuses and bombsights (at Zeiss Ikon A.G.),^[132] aircraft components, anti-aircraft guns, field guns, and small arms, poison gas, gears and differentials, electrical and X-ray apparatus, electric gauges, gas masks, Junkers aircraft engines, and Messerschmitt fighter cockpit parts.^[7]

The second of the five points addresses the prohibition in the Hague Conventions, of "attack or bombardment" of "undefended" towns. The USAFHD report states that Dresden was protected by anti-aircraft defences, anti-aircraft guns, and searchlights, under the Combined Dresden (Corps Area IV) and Berlin (Corps Area III) Luftwaffe Administration Commands.^[7]

The third and fourth points say that the size of the Dresden raid—in terms of numbers, types of bombs and the means of delivery—were commensurate with the military objective and similar to other Allied bombings. On 23 February 1945, the Allies bombed Pforzheim and caused an estimated 20,000 civilian fatalities; the most devastating raid on any city was on Tokyo on 9–10 March (the *Meetinghouse* raid)^[133] caused over 100,000 civilian casualties. The tonnage and types of bombs listed in the service records of the Dresden raid were comparable to (or less than) throw weights of bombs dropped in other air attacks carried out in 1945. In the case of Dresden, as in many other similar attacks, the hour break in between the RAF raids was a deliberate ploy to attack the fire fighters and rescue crews.^[134]

In late July 1943, the city of Hamburg was bombed in Operation Gomorrah by combined RAF and USAAF strategic bomber forces. Four major raids were carried out in the span of 10 days, of which the most notable, on 27–28 July, created a devastating firestorm effect similar to Dresden's, killing at least 45,000 people.^[135] Two thirds of the remaining population reportedly fled the city after the raids.^[136]

The fifth point is that the firebombing achieved the intended effect of disabling the industry in Dresden. It was estimated that at least 23% of the city's industrial buildings were destroyed or severely damaged. The damage to other infrastructure and communications was immense, which would have severely limited the potential use of Dresden to stop the Soviet advance. The report concludes with:

The specific forces and means employed in the Dresden bombings were in keeping with the forces and means employed by the Allies in other aerial attacks on comparable targets in Germany. The Dresden bombings achieved the strategic objectives that underlay the attack and were of mutual importance to the Allies and the Russians.^[7]

Arguments against justification

Military reasons

The journalist Alexander McKee cast doubt on the meaningfulness of the list of targets mentioned in the 1953 USAF report, pointing out that the military barracks listed as a target were a long way out of the city and were not in fact targeted during the raid.^[137] The "huttred camps" mentioned in the report as military targets were also not military but were camps for refugees.^[137] It is also stated that the important Autobahn bridge to the west of the city was not targeted or attacked, and that no railway stations were on the British target maps, nor any bridges, such as the railway bridge spanning the Elbe River.^[138] Commenting on this, McKee says: "The standard whitewash gambit, both British and American, is to mention that Dresden contained targets X, Y and Z, and to let the innocent reader assume that these targets were attacked, whereas in fact the bombing plan totally omitted them and thus, except for one or two mere accidents, they escaped".^[139] McKee further asserts "The bomber commanders were not really interested in any purely military or economic targets, which was just as well, for they knew very little about Dresden; the RAF even lacked proper maps of the city. What they were looking for was a big built up area which they could burn, and that Dresden possessed in full measure."^[140]

According to the historian Sönke Neitzel, "it is difficult to find any evidence in German documents that the destruction of Dresden had any consequences worth mentioning on the Eastern Front. The industrial plants of Dresden played no significant role in German industry at this stage in the war".^[141] Wing Commander H. R. Allen said, "The final phase of



The Zwinger Palace in 1900

Bomber Command's operations was far and away the worst. Traditional British chivalry and the use of minimum force in war was to become a mockery and the outrages perpetrated by the bombers will be remembered a thousand years hence".^[142]

Military facilities in the north

The Albertstadt, in the north of Dresden, had remarkable military facilities that the bombings failed to hit. Today they are officer's schools ("Offiziersschule des Heeres") for the Bundeswehr and its military history museum (from prehistoric to modern times).

As an immoral act, but not a war crime

...ever since the deliberate mass bombing of civilians in the second world war, and as a direct response to it, the international community has outlawed the practice. It first tried to do so in the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, but the UK and the US would not agree, since to do so would have been an admission of guilt for their systematic "area bombing" of German and Japanese civilians.

— A.C. Grayling.^[143]

Frederick Taylor told Der Spiegel, "I personally find the attack on Dresden horrific. It was overdone, it was excessive and is to be regretted enormously,"

but, "A war crime is a very specific thing which international lawyers argue about all the time and I would not be prepared to commit myself nor do I see why I should. I'm a historian."^[123] Similarly, British philosopher A. C. Grayling has described British area bombardment as an "immoral act" and "moral crime" because "destroying everything ... contravenes every moral and humanitarian principle debated in connection with the just conduct of war," but, "It is not strictly correct to describe area bombing as a 'war crime'".^[144]

As a war crime

Though no one involved in the bombing of Dresden was ever charged with a war crime, some hold the opinion that the bombing was one.

According to Dr. Gregory Stanton, lawyer and president of Genocide Watch:

...every human being having the capacity for both good and evil. The Nazi Holocaust was among the most evil genocides in history. But the Allies' firebombing of Dresden and nuclear destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were also war crimes – and as Leo Kuper and Eric Markusen have argued, also acts of genocide. We are all capable of evil and must be restrained by law from committing it.^[145]

Historian Donald Bloxham states, "The bombing of Dresden on 13–14 February 1945 was a war crime".^[146] He further argues there was a strong *prima facie* case for trying Winston Churchill among others and a theoretical case Churchill could have been found guilty. "This should be a sobering thought. If, however it is also a startling one, this is probably less



A memorial at cemetery Heidefriedhof in Dresden. It reads: "*Wieviele starben? Wer kennt die Zahl?; An deinen Wunden sieht man die Qual; der Namenlosen die hier verbrannt; im Höllenfeuer aus Menschenhand.*" ("How many died? Who knows the count?; In your wounds one sees the ordeal; Of the nameless who in here were conflagrated; In the hellfire made by hands of man.")

the result of widespread understanding of the nuance of international law and more because in the popular mind 'war criminal', like 'paedophile' or 'terrorist', has developed into a moral rather than a legal categorisation".^[146]

German author Günter Grass is one of several intellectuals and commentators who have also called the bombing a war crime.^[147]

Proponents of this position argue that the devastation from firebombing was greater than anything that could be justified by military necessity alone, and this establishes a *prima facie* case. The Allies were aware of the effects of firebombing, as British cities had been subject to them during the Blitz.^[d] Proponents disagree that Dresden had a military garrison and claim that most of the industry was in the outskirts and not in the targeted city centre,^[148] and that the cultural significance of the city should have precluded the Allies from bombing it.

British historian Antony Beevor wrote that Dresden was considered relatively safe, having been spared previous RAF night attacks, and that at the time of the raids there were up to 300,000 refugees in the area seeking sanctuary from the advancing Red Army from the Eastern Front.^[149] In *Fire Sites*, German historian Jörg Friedrich says that the RAF's bombing campaign against German cities in the last months of the war served no military purpose. He claims that Winston Churchill's decision to bomb a shattered Germany between January and May 1945 was a war crime. According to him, 600,000 civilians died during the allied bombing of German cities, including 72,000 children. Some 45,000 people died on one night during the firestorms that engulfed Hamburg in July 1943.^[150]

Political response in Germany



A demonstration by the German NPD on 13 February 2005. The text says: "Terror bombings: never again!"

Far-right politicians in Germany have sparked a great deal of controversy by promoting the term "*Bombenholocaust*" ("holocaust by bomb") to describe the raids.^[151] *Der Spiegel* writes that, for decades, the Communist government of East Germany promoted the bombing as an example of "Anglo-American terror," and now the same rhetoric is being used by the far right.^[152] An example can be found in the extremist nationalist party *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (NPD). A party's representative, Jürgen Gansel, described the Dresden raids as "mass murder," and "Dresden's holocaust of bombs".^[153] This provoked an outrage in the German parliament and triggered responses from the media. Prosecutors said that it was illegal to call the bombing a holocaust.^[154] In 2010, several demonstrations by organizations opposing the far-right blocked a demonstration of far-right

organizations.

Phrases like "Bomber-Harris, do it again!", "Bomber-Harris Superstar - Thanks from the red Antifa", and "*Deutsche Täter sind keine Opfer!*" ("German perpetrators are no victims!") are popular slogans among the so-called "Anti-Germans"—a small radical left-wing political movement in Germany and Austria.^{[155][156]} In 1995, the fiftieth anniversary of the bombing, Anti-Germans praised the bombing on the grounds that so many of the city's civilians had supported Nazism. Similar rallies take place every year.^[157]



Anti-German banner expressing support for Arthur Harris

In literature

Kurt Vonnegut

Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse-Five or The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death* (1969) used some elements from his experiences as a prisoner of war at Dresden during the bombing. His account relates that over 135,000 were killed during the firebombings. Vonnegut recalled "utter destruction" and "carnage unfathomable." The Germans put him and other POWs to work gathering bodies for mass burial. "But there were too many corpses to bury. So instead the Nazis sent in troops with flamethrowers. All these civilians' remains were burned to ashes".^[158]

In the special introduction to the 1976 Franklin Library edition of the novel, he wrote:

The Dresden atrocity, tremendously expensive and meticulously planned, was so meaningless, finally, that only one person on the entire planet got any benefit from it. I am that person. I wrote this book, which earned a lot of money for me and made my reputation, such as it is. One way or another, I got two or three dollars for every person killed. Some business I'm in.^[159]

This experience was also used in several of his other books and is included in his posthumously published stories: *Armageddon in Retrospect*.^[158] The firebombing of Dresden was depicted in George Roy Hill's 1972 movie adaptation of Vonnegut's novel.

The death toll of 135,000 given by Vonnegut was taken from *The Destruction of Dresden*, a 1963 book by David Irving. In a 1965 letter to *The Guardian*, Irving later adjusted his estimates even higher, "almost certainly between 100,000 and 250,000", but all these figures were shortly found to be inflated: Irving finally published a correction in The Times in a 1966 letter to the editor^[160] lowering it to 25,000, in line with subsequent scholarship. Despite Irving's eventual much lower numbers, and later accusations of generally poor scholarship, the figure popularized by Vonnegut remains in general circulation.

Freeman Dyson, a British (and later American) physicist who had worked as a young man with RAF Bomber Command from July 1943 to the end of the war,^[161] wrote in later years: "For many years I had intended to write a book on the bombing. Now I do not need to write it, because Vonnegut has written it much better than I could. He was in Dresden at the time and saw what happened. His book is not only good literature. It is also truthful. The only inaccuracy that I found in it is that it does not say that the night attack which produced the holocaust was a British affair. The Americans only came the following day to plow over the rubble. Vonnegut, being American, did not want to write his account in such a way that the whole thing could be blamed on the British. Apart from that, everything he says is true."^[162] Dyson later goes on to say: "Since the beginning of the war I had been retreating step by step from one moral position to another, until at the end I had no moral position at all".^[163]

Other

- The German diarist Victor Klemperer includes a first-hand account of the firestorm in his published works.^[164]
- The main action of the novel *Closely Observed Trains*, by Czech author Bohumil Hrabal, takes place on the night of the first raid.
- In the 1983 Pink Floyd album *The Final Cut*, "The Hero's Return", the protagonist lives his years after World War II tormented by "desperate memories", part of him still flying "over Dresden at angels 1–5" (fifteen-thousand feet).
- In the song "Tailgunner", Iron Maiden starts with "Trace your way back 50 Years / To the glow of Dresden – blood and tears".

- Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) incorporates the bombings into essential parts of the story.
- The bombings are a central theme in the 2006 German TV production *Dresden* by director Roland Suso Richter. Along with the romantic plot between a British bomber pilot and a German nurse, the movie attempts to reconstruct the facts surrounding the Dresden bombings from both the perspective of the RAF pilots and the Germans in Dresden at the time.^[165]

See also

- Siege of Dresden, 1760. In some histories the term "bombardment of Dresden" refers to an early bombardment by the Prussian army in July 1760 that destroyed many buildings but killed only 49 citizens.
- The Blitz – German air raids on British cities in which at least 40,000 died, including 57 consecutive nights of air raids just over London.
- Bombing of Warsaw in World War II

References

Notes

- All raid times are CET; Britain was on double summer time in early 1945, which was the same time as CET.
- During the Second World War, Britain was on summer time and double summer time or UTC+1 and UTC+2, the same as CET and CET+1
- Civilian strafing was in fact a regular practice of the Luftwaffe throughout the war.^[66]
- Longmate describes a 22 September 1941 memorandum prepared by the British Air Ministry's Directorate of Bombing Operations that puts numbers to this analysis (Longmate 1983, p. 122).

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- Norwood, 2013, page 237
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- Angell 1953.
- McKee 1983, p. 62.

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